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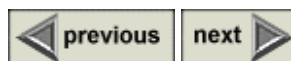
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WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

ROYCE WHITE'S NEXT FIGHT

THE FORMER HOOPS PHENOM SAYS HIS MENTAL HEALTH ACTIVISM GOT HIM BLACKBALLED FROM THE NBA. NOW HE'S GOING INSIDE THE OCTAGON

► BY L. JON WERTHEIM
► PHOTOGRAPH BY
ERICK W. RASCO

T HE NO. 16 PICK in the 2012 NBA draft is basted in sweat, huffing and puffing in the gym as the veins on his arms and neck look as if they're attempting a jailbreak from his skin. At 6' 8" and 260-or-so pounds, Royce White is a mountain of man, but surprisingly agile. He's going through a battery of meticulously designed drills, alternately meant to improve offense, defense, movement, footwork and stamina.

Yet in this gym, there is no hoop. And there are no balls. Actually, check that. There are balls. They just don't bounce. Plyometric and medicine balls. White is working to improve the range and accuracy not of his jump shot, but of his punches. The defense isn't about preventing his man from scoring; it's about preventing his opponent from blasting him in the face. The

ROLLING ROYCE

White, who last played in the NBA in 2014, is now training for his first MMA fight.

idea is not to conserve energy for the final, critical minutes of the game, but rather the final minutes of a fight, when your back isn't just metaphorically against a wall, but literally pressed up against a chain-link metal fence.

It was one Minnesotan, F. Scott Fitzgerald, who declared that there are no second acts in American life. It's long been disproven—even A-Rod is beloved these days—and here now comes another Minnesotan, Royce White, age 28, attempting a most unlikely sports encore. Six years after leaving the NBA—blackballed, he insists—he is refashioning himself as a mixed martial arts fighter. He began training in 2018, preparing for his first fight, likely to come later this year.

What's the motivation? White knows the question is coming and, like any good fighter, has a counter. As is often the case with White, it comes from an unlikely angle. "As a basketball player, I watched the deterioration of the competitive ethos, the erosion of the value of competition. The entertainment and the dollars [subsumed] competition on so many levels," he says. "Mixed martial arts, it's not 'just

business.' It's entertaining but not entertainment. It's the highest level of competition. And the purest."

GROWING UP in the Twin Cities, White was an extravagantly gifted athlete. Just as he could play any of the five positions—and take justified pride in resisting classification—his interests extended well beyond basketball. He was "a reader, a thinker, a seeker," comfortable using his mind to engage. He was the kid who stayed after class to debate teachers.

At 16, when White went through a school-based mental health program—"one that federal government has since disbanded, I should add," he says with annoyance—he was evaluated by a family practitioner. The doctor diagnosed him with generalized anxiety disorder. He read the definition in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and recognized himself. He also recognized the symptoms in his mother and grandmother. It was, as much anything, a relief. *So you mean to tell me, he recalls thinking, I'm not the only person on the planet who feels like they're going to die every four hours?*

The state's Mr. Basketball in 2009, White committed to the University of Minnesota, but he never played a game. As a freshman he was suspended after being charged with theft and fifth-degree assault for allegedly shoplifting and shoving a security guard at the Mall of America. (He ended up pleading guilty to a lesser charge.) He transferred to Iowa State, where, wrapped in the warm blanket of a college community, he was open about his mental health challenges. On campus, he became something of a cult hero. He recalls: "It was like, 'Royce White has what I have—what